There are at least three kinds of gratitude. One can be stated like this:

“I’ll be grateful when…”

I am sure you are familiar with this kind of gratitude.
“I’ll be grateful when I win the lottery.”
“I’ll be grateful when my children are self-sufficient.”
“I’ll be grateful when I meet my husband or wife.”
“I’ll be grateful when there is peace in Syria.”
“I’ll be grateful when this sanctuary is filled every Sunday.”

This is one kind of gratitude.

In terms of our relationship with God, this kind of gratitude places conditions on God. “I’ll be grateful to you, God, when you help my daughter graduate from college.”

“I’ll be grateful, Lord, when my husband is no longer addicted to prescription drugs.”

“I’ll be grateful to you, God, if you’ll spare my mother’s life.”

This kind of gratitude is manipulative: when all my conditions are met, I’ll be grateful. When life goes my way, I’ll be grateful. This has to be the most shallow form of gratitude. Who wouldn’t be grateful when your mother, diagnosed with cancer and inevitable death, experiences a dramatic turnaround with a wonderful new prognosis? There’s nothing wrong with this kind of gratitude – when things go our way – but it isn’t very deep. And it’s conditional on how well life pleases us.

In our Dayton church, there was a vivacious young woman who was active in the youth group when I served as her pastor. After we left, she was diagnosed with a rare and fatal disease. Once, when we were back in Dayton, her pastor asked if I would see her and I was only too glad. At that time, they weren’t certain she had much longer to live. When I walked into her bedroom, I was stunned. She was emaciated. And the disease had created huge sores on her hands, feet and hips. And she had huge holes in the palms of her hand, and nearly all her fingers had turned black and she had already lost several fingers and toes completely. She eventually went into hospice when her death seemed inevitable.

People were praying for this young woman from everywhere. And something miraculous happened. Her disease somehow went into remission and today she is healthy and vital, probably approaching 45 years old. You can imagine the gratitude of her parents, their friends,
her loved ones and the Dayton church when this miraculous recovery occurred. This describes
the second kind of gratitude:

“I feel gratitude because…”

“I feel gratitude because my marriage has lasted forty-five years.”
“I feel gratitude because we just had a healthy baby girl.”
“I feel gratitude because our son returned from the war without injury.”
“I feel gratitude because I just got a promotion and raise in salary.”
“I feel gratitude because you are such a faithful friend.”
“I feel gratitude because we surpassed our challenge goal.”

There are moments of life in which gratitude is a natural response to something good that has
happened to us, maybe even something unexpected. We could call this Obvious Gratitude
because we feel gratitude for obvious reasons.

Now, there are people who seemingly can’t experience gratitude at such obvious times. The
good is never good enough. Or, they are so insecure that they can’t give credit to anyone but
themselves. This kind of gratitude, “I feel grateful because…” is a wonderful thing. It helps us
pause at appropriate times and places and give thanks for the good that has occurred.

There is, however, at least one more kind of gratitude. And it is this kind which I would like to
call “Deep Gratitude” and is characterized in this statement:

“In spite of this, I am grateful.” Or, “Even though this has happened, still, I am grateful.”

“I am grateful to be a father even though it sure has its challenging moments.”
“I am grateful to be a father even though it sure has its challenging moments.”
“I am grateful to be an American, even though there are things about this nation I would
change.”
“I am grateful to be an American, even though there are things about this nation I would
change.”
“I am grateful to live in Kansas City, in spite of the fact that it’s a long way to fresh seafood.”

Deep Gratitude.
Everything is not coming up roses, and it never will. We often want our lives to become like
manicured lawns, every blade clipped, every shrub trimmed, every weed pulled, every flower
bed in perfect symmetry, every flower in continuous year-round bloom. My yard never quite
looks like that. Something is always out of order. I always have improvements that should be
made.

Why should I feel gratitude when all is not well? Why should I experience gratitude when I still
have unresolved issues? Can one honestly experience gratitude when troubles abound?

If we only allow ourselves to be grateful when everything turns out right, we won’t be grateful
very often or very long. Life has a way of handing us both what we want and what we dread.
We so seldom have it all, win it all, gain it all, earn it all, receive it all. Reality seldom follows
our scripts.
Deep gratitude, profound gratitude, comes to us in the middle of life, not at those rare junctures when everything is going our way. But at the normal times when we are in the midst of struggle, worry, or even despair. Even so, we can pause and be thankful.

In my first parish, I was honored to have been the pastor of Florence Crannell Means. Florence was a popular children’s author and published many books. She lived in her home near the Flatiron Mountains in Boulder, Colorado. By the time I knew Florence, she was nearly bedridden. And yet, I never knew her when she wasn’t grateful. When she couldn’t get outside on a beautiful day, she experienced gratitude for the bright skies and beautiful views from her windows. When she was in physical pain, she experienced gratitude for her clearness of mind. When her hands wouldn’t cooperate and she couldn’t write, she experienced gratitude for a tape recorder. When her eyes began to fail, she expressed gratitude for a magnifying glass she kept close at hand. When I remember Flossie now, forty years later, I remember her gratitude even though she had reached a point in her life when so many things were failing her.

I think of Irene Howard in our own congregation. Irene will turn 103 on September 26. She is very frail. She can’t hear well and she says, “When I look at you, I can only see an outline, but I can’t really make out who you are.” She can’t read very well and can’t watch television anymore. And yet every time I call on Irene, I am encompassed by her gratitude. She hasn’t been able to come to church for many years—but she is so grateful for First Baptist Church. Irene tells me that she prays for me every night before she goes to bed. She wants to know all the news about the church. But even in her limited way, Irene participates in our church, from a distance, with such profound gratitude. I always leave her determined all the more to bring her congregation back to more life.

These two older women have learned the meaning of deep gratitude.

As I look back over the life that Jan and I have lived over 45 years together, we have encountered our share of trials and struggles. Probably like you. We’ve been through four major surgeries, three cancer scares, one serious episode with cancer, a struggle with infertility, one ongoing disease that can’t be cured, a major automobile accident, a serious head injury, an experience of violent aggression, our son’s stroke this summer, and more – and all of this occurring in the fishbowl of a pastor’s life. And yet it came to me as I was preparing this sermon that even in the midst of struggle, there is even more evidence of God working in and through the struggle I can clearly recognize signs of God’s healing upon us.

I can experience gratitude, even though not everything in life has gone as I would have scripted it.

I will never forget a conversation with my sister, about a year after her oldest child, her nine-year-old daughter, was dragged to death in a tragic schoolbus accident. She said that even though the pain of this loss will be with her for the rest of her life, still, she was so grateful for the nine years she had with Sheri. Even though she had questions as to why this happened, still, she was grateful to God for the gift of this child in her life.
That’s deep gratitude.

For what are you grateful today? I doubt that everything in your life has reached the ultimate point of perfection or completion. We’re always at some mid-way point, “sorta up, sorta down”. But can you and I feel gratitude, nonetheless?

The high school graduate can sabotage a feeling of joy in fear of the college education that awaits her. A cast can sabotage a feeling of gratitude over a fine performance for fear they might not do it as well tomorrow night. We feel grateful when the Royals win – but are we also grateful for their effort when they lose? Any cause of celebration can be ruined if you let it. Worry can consume anything.

The Psalmists didn’t sugar-coat reality. They talked of struggles. They talked of isolation. They talked of feeling distance from God. Even so, nearly all the Psalms express some kind of gratitude. The 66th Psalm speaks of the testing and trials his community had been experiencing. It speaks of the burdens they have carried, the oppression, and how they went through “fire and water.” The Psalmist speaks of how easy it would be to “cherish iniquity in his heart.”

Even so, the Psalmist says, “All you who worship God, come here and listen: I will tell you everything that God has done for me.” (CEV 66:16)

This Psalm begins: “Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth! Sing the glory of God’s name! Give to God glorious praise! Say to God, ‘How awesome are your deeds.’” (66:1-3a, 16)

Things could always be better, and of course, things could always be worse. Better, therefore, to pause in the midst of life, and give thanks.

What is gratitude, anyway, but a Great Attitude?

Deep Gratitude is the opposite of bragging. It isn’t saying, “Look how marvelous I am! Look at the awesome thing I’ve done.” Deep Gratitude is the Great Attitude of choosing to express thanks to God even though we could just as easily complain or whine.

There’s a story about a loving family who had their first baby and they were very attentive to their baby. Except when most children begin to speak, their child said nothing. After months when speech should be developing but wasn’t, they went to speech therapists, who could find nothing wrong. And the parents became quite good at sensing just what their child needed just at the right moments.

One day, the father was serving oatmeal for breakfast and the child said his first words: “Too cold.” The mother and father rushed over to the child and said, “What did you say?” Pointing to the oatmeal he repeated, “Too cold.” The mother said, “We didn’t know you could speak. Why did you decide to speak today?” The little guy replied, “Up til now, everything’s been OK.”
How easy it is to complain, and to focus on our struggles, worries and problems. Maybe we would do well to remember that in each moment of life, no matter how painful, there is always cause of gratitude. And that is the challenge of Deep Gratitude, to find the ground of gratitude when we are surrounded by sinking sand.

As people of faith, we can always find God’s hand upon our lives. As people of faith, we can always know that we are not alone, and never abandoned. It doesn’t mean that we are immune from despair or depression. Of course not. But it does mean that we can always ask the question, “How can I express gratitude to God in this moment?”

A pastor was known for always using the phrase, “It might be worse,” whenever any calamity came his way. One day a friend said to him, “I’ve something to tell you and you won’t be able to respond with your usual phrase.” The friend continued, “Last night, I dreamed I went to hell.” But, even so, the pastor said, “It might be worse.” The friend replied, “Man alive, what could be worse than going to hell?” With a twinkle in his eye, the pastor said, “It could be true.”

I enjoy the writing of Joan Chittister, and one of my favorite books is devoted to the topic of struggle. She writes, “Life forges us in struggle. From one end of life to another we duel and joust, contest and dispute, rebel and revolt—against forces outside ourselves, yes, but also against tensions within us… I have learned that all struggle is not destructive. I have come to understand that it isn’t struggle that defeats us, it is our failure to struggle that depletes the human spirit… All struggle is not loss… In fact, struggle is an unavoidable part of life… Just when we feel that we have finally gotten it right, finally achieved what we set out to get, finally found what we have always wanted, the bubble bursts, the bauble breaks, the future is gone.” Then, she quotes the Roman philosopher Seneca who said, “Failure changes for the better; success for the worse.” She continues, “Success can soften us but the…fact is that there are simply some parts of the human character that are honed best, and maybe only, under tension”…through struggle. (Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope, Eerdmans)

Can we look back over our lives and give thanks for struggle? Can we be grateful for seasons of challenge, of tension, of things not going our way? Can we look back over our lives to recognize that those are the very times when our lives are most molded and held by God?

With the Psalmist, let us say, “Tell everyone on this earth to shout praises to God! Sing about God’s glorious name! Honor God with praises! Say to God, ‘Everything you do is awesome!’ …Come and see the wonderful things our God has done for me.” Amen.